

Report on the Community Leadership Summit

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Introduction

The Community Leadership Summit (CLS), on March 22, 2006, brought community residents, service providers and leaders under one roof to discuss issues of concern to stakeholders in the Town of Wake Forest. The objective of this Human Relations Council of Wake Forest (HRC) sponsored forum, in conjunction with the town, was to gain insight and valuable input from stakeholders in the town, in order to assist in the efficiency of delivering adequate service to citizens and provide recommendations to the board of commissioners for future community-wide planning efforts.

The HRC is mandated by the Town of Wake Forest Board of Commissioners to monitor, mediate, and hear concerns, problems and potential complaints; facilitate resolve of stakeholder concerns, while fostering communication, understanding, and solidarity among citizens of the town.

An Action-Oriented Community Diagnosis (AOCD) released on May 10, 2005, by the School of Public Health at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill was the premise of this information-gathering session. This AOCD study previously assessed six themes following feedback forums with community service providers and leaders, and offers steps for improvement in areas of **growth and development, transportation, community identity, race**

relations, class differences, and education. This earlier research was used as bases for determining progress of improvements.

This CLS report will be issued to the Board of Commissioners as part of the council's fiduciary responsibility of reporting and recommending measures that promote the overall welfare town citizens.

Method of Analysis

In this analysis for determining areas of critical importance to stakeholders, qualitative data was recorded from six discussion groups made up of 40 town officials, administrators, service providers, leaders and residents in total. Data was recorded by HRC members who were assigned to these six respective breakout sessions. The intent of using this qualitative approach is to assist the HRC members, other citizens, and Town of Wake Forest administrators, in identifying and then resolving what participants considered priority issues of concern. This approach is consistent with the AOCD assessment.

Feedback Session Findings

Some of the same issues of concern by participants of the forum were consistent with results from the AOCD report prepared by the School of Public Health at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, though there were additional areas of discussion not identified in the AOCD study. There was also

theme overlap wherein subjects specific to certain breakout sessions were discussed in other breakout sessions. As a result, this report reflects theme interrelationships among the six topics assessed in this document.

Although the six discussion topics were specific by subject grouping, concerns of about inadequate infrastructure, public transportation needs, the need for cultural sensitivity, lack of communication, and a need for the town to maintain its small town charm permeated across most of these subject categories. While these concerns showed higher frequency of discussion within respective groups than other issues captured in the assessment, this does not lessen the significance of issues discussed less frequent, and that did not overlap into other breakout sessions.

This assessment does however suggest that citizen concerns showing higher frequency of discussion reflect a majority concern and should be considered high priority for the Town of Wake Forest.

Growth and Development

AOCD Assessment

The majority of community members and service providers felt that growth and development in Wake Forest is a positive change, however, the infrastructure necessary to sustain such growth and accommodate lower income

communities is not in place. Recommendations were to form a watchdog group or citizens advisory council that is responsible for the monitoring of growth and development decisions being made by town administrators and departments, and communicating information about those decisions to the rest of the community.

CLS Assessment of Growth and Development

Participants involved in the CLS Growth and Development group discussion felt the issue was considered one of the major priorities for the Town of Wake Forest. Dialogue centered around (1) overdevelopment, (2) the duplication of business products and services, (3) resident proximity and access to various business, (4) retail and its impact on the local tax base, (5) the redevelopment of Downtown Wake Forest and its impact on local merchants, (6) increasing home value without overdevelopment, (7) affordable housing, (8) present road construction and the accommodation of increased traffic flow, (9) and the need to maintain a small town image.

Recommendations

The consensus among group participants is that all residents can benefit from growth as long as it is controlled. There are four food chains in close proximity to one another on Capital Boulevard, but there is a lack of these businesses downtown for local residents. The Downtown Revitalization Corporation should look at drawing outside residents to shops within the Wake

Forest community, in effect, assisting the local economy by increasing the local tax base. Retrofitting roads has followed the wave of growth. This must be a priority before development decisions are made. Participants discussed the town's move to hire a development consultant and felt this would benefit citizens, particularly those residents living in low traffic and low income areas of the community. One of the questions posed was whether or not there was much incentive to build new stores in these areas of town?

Participants suggested a “welcome wagon” committee to assist newcomers, and to draw from the diversity of town advisory councils in a brainstorming session surrounding these issues of import. While there were more questions than answers in the group discussion, stakeholders in the breakout session agreed there needs to be careful growth and development planning in order that positive outcomes outweigh negative.

Transportation

AOCD Assessment

Participants in the AOCD forum agreed that public transportation was a critical area for the community; that residents without cars faced difficulty in accessing services, due to bus routes not extending beyond the City of Raleigh into Wake Forest. In this previous assessment, transportation was identified in

interviews but not in the forum discussion, therefore deemed a secondary domain and subsumed in discussions of growth and development.

CLS Assessment of Transportation

Stakeholders participating in the Community Leadership Summit identified several critical transportation concerns to include public transit, inadequate infrastructure, and future development of greenways. A considerable amount of the discussion focused on elderly and youth who rely on alternate modes of public transportation. Key issues of discussion in this breakout session were (1) the disrepair of sidewalks in the town, particularly in the north east quadron of the town, not being conducive to recreational activity such as biking and walking, (2) the feasibility of providing public and rapid transportation to citizens needing to travel outside town limits, (3) developing the connectivity of the greenway system as part of alternate access planning to enable citizens to maximize quality of life in the town, (4) while major construction to bypass 98 is underway, participants felt road construction should connect Franklin Street, which is currently a dead end road, (5) and educating citizens on the benefits of easements and right-of-way in an effort to widen roads and develop transportation infrastructure. While the concern over taxpayers bearing the cost of such retrofitting antiquated road structures was discussed, overall consensus was that public transportation and development of infrastructure were primary in reaching overall transportation access and structural needs.

Recommendations

Participants agreed to present to the board of commissioners the idea of forming a citizen's ad hoc committee to review critical areas of the town where people depend on alternative modes of transportation; the Dubois Center was suggested as a potential meeting place. Part of assessing the transportation needs of citizens would include a demographic study of traffic flow and infrastructure, employing Geographic Information System (GIS) software to capture, manage and analyze geographic information for future construction planning.

Community Identity

AOCD Assessment

Participants of the AOCD forum agreed that community pride and identity were assets to Wake Forest; a majority of participants wanted to see the town's pride and spirit translated into more involvement and communication.

Recommendations were made to form an ambassador program to provide and guide newcomers to the town with information that would help them find a niche in the community.

CLS Assessment of Community Identity

Discussion centered around the transformation from the town's long-held image of being a small community where everyone knew each other, to rapid growth and a deviation from small town charm. Areas of import were (1) small

town charm erosion and the loss of sense of community, (2) booming growth and stress on the infrastructure, (3) accommodating diversity of religion and faith, (4) and branding the town as a place where Wake Forest College¹ once resided 50 years ago, and not the present home of Wake Forest University (WFU); participants felt the general public has the misconception that WFU is located in the Town of Wake Forest.

Community characteristics identified in this session encompassed (1) the Dubois Center being a historical education facility that provides outreach services and community events, (2) Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary representing a prominent institution of higher education for student entering the faith community. (3) small business landmarks that add a sense of nostalgia to the community, like *Shorty's* and the *Ice Cream Shop*, (4) the Wake Forest Institute Birthplace being a pillar in the community, speaking to the origin of Wake Forest University and the location for present outdoor events, (5) historic homes documented in the national register, (6) Paschel Golf Course where PGA Tour Champion Arnold Palmer once played golf while attending the college, (7) and the academic and athletic achievements of Wake Forest-Rolesville High School.

There was consensus among participants that the town needs to raise the level of awareness of community-related events that would enable participation

¹ Wake Forest Institute was re-chartered as Wake Forest College in 1838.

of all citizens, to include *Meet in the Street*, *Six Sundays*, *Herb Fest*, *Christmas Dinner at the Forks*, *Good Neighbor Day*, and the *Dubois Jazz Fest*.

Recommendations

The town should re-assess its method of promoting local events to endear overall population, while branding the town's uniqueness; design current historical materials that speak to the heritage of the town and identifies historic landmarks; create maps that identify events, places and historical markers for visitors and newcomers. Participants agreed that the town may want to guard against economic development projects that infringe upon historic landmarks; develop walkable communities by investing in the construction of sidewalks to encourage pedestrian mobility; create an ambassador program that enables representatives of the town to educate schools, organizations, and home owners associations about the town; create an umbrella group that would leverage the priorities of town councils for promoting and funding individual and collaborative objectives; begin strategic planning of *Centennial Park 2009* as the town nears its 100 year anniversary; and offer bricks for sale, which allows families to purchase markers with their names along with a slogan in designated areas of Wake Forest.

Race Relations

AOCD Assessment

The AOCD study found racial interaction minimal between African American, Caucasian, and Latino communities in the town. The forum participants in this earlier study recommended the formation of a discussion group to address and initiate race relations improvement including educating town officials and requesting donations to offset costs for sports programs for minority children.

CLS Assessment of Race Relations

Participants in this discussion group dialoged about the underpinnings of race relations in the town, finding correlation between race relations and (1) the safety of children, (2) lack of communication, (3) limited minority job opportunities with the town, (4) eroding sidewalks and crosswalks, (5) the lack of crossing guards for school-aged children in low-income neighborhoods, (6) inadequate trash pick-up in economically stressed communities, and (7) language barriers among the town's growing Hispanic population.

There was consensus that low-income areas of town are not perceived as important as middle and upper middle class neighborhoods such as the Heritage community. Participants felt busy intersections, such as Main Street and Rogers

Road required an on-duty crossing guard during the opening and closing of school to ensure the safety of minority children, and the need for a town sponsored mentoring program to promote cultural awareness and equal opportunity among diverse racial groups.

Recommendations

These stakeholders suggested that the town in collaboration with the Chamber of Commerce and the realtors association, prepare literature for new and prospective homeowners, in an effort to keep citizens abreast of municipal nuances and policies; partner with schools in order to promote a positive environment in which diversity is valued; encourage students and citizens at-large to learn the Spanish language, to include erecting Spanish/English street signs as to eliminate the potential for automobile accidents; sponsor a multicultural event wherein various cultures can learn about one another through food, crafts, music and dance; and hire qualified minorities in visible jobs, in effect, reinforcing a belief in minority children that they can aspire to a high level of social and economic attainment. Participants also felt that blight in low-income, predominantly minority neighborhoods has become a reflection on all citizens who dwell in these areas due to a lack of communication and cooperation with the town with regard to scheduling. Group participants suggested that the town divide its jurisdiction into sections and allow each section a day for trash pick-up. More important, communities must be re-informed of trash pick-up schedules.

Class Differences

AOCD Assessment

The majority of community members and service providers felt there is a growing socioeconomic divide in Wake Forest. This hinders the provision of services as well as the sense and function of the collective community.

Participant in the AOCD forum suggested upgrading infrastructure in low income neighborhoods to include home repair, improvement of sidewalks, and access to supermarkets.

CLS Assessment of Class Differences

The consensus among participants in this focus group was that class differences were defined by education and economics rather than race, ethnicity, color and religion. Class differences were associated with (1) inadequacies of geographic location and infrastructure such as dilapidated homes and blight-ridden neighborhoods, (2) the lack of an adequate public transportation system as a means of accessing resources, (3) inequitable community development projects and criteria set for neighborhood improvements (4) and apathy among citizens in less affluent neighborhoods where citizens perceive local government as neither listening nor concerned with their general welfare.

Recommendations

Two recommendations were made by participants in an effort to eliminate the notion of class differences in the town. Both recommendations are relative to one another and achieve common objectives. The first involves gentrification, wherein developers and more affluent citizens purchase low income housing and raise the value of the neighborhood; in effect, negatively impacting low income residents by making housing less affordable, thereby indirectly forcing them out of their communities. The second involves economic education or the re-education of less affluent citizens through finance-related mentoring programs.

The idea of teaching the value of home ownership and credit worthiness were raised. A newly formed organization in the town, Community Development Corporation (CDC) was identified as a potential facilitator of such programs. The value of a mentoring program enables low income residents the chance to realize economic stability while becoming full participants in the governmental process as it related to their communities. In concept, the mentor would be someone who the client could identify as a role model and one who represents achievement. Participants suggested that a task force be assembled to identify and assess best practices for such a program, and confer throughout the duration of planning and implementation to ensure efficiency. Discussion was also given to initiating outreach to disenfranchised citizens through schools, churches and town meetings as part of eliminating social and economic disparity.

Education

AOCD Assessment

Participants were concerned about the present and future capabilities of Wake County public schools to accommodate the needs of students and families in Wake Forest. Recommendations made involved educating and involving parents, community members, and town officials on school growth and planning issues, strategy options, and future Wake County school system plans through an Education forum.

CLS Assessment of Education

Participants felt that education was such a broad issue, therefore agreeing that the entire community of Wake Forest needs to become better informed of education systems and policies that impact overall quality of life. Problems at large were thought to be (1) growth in population, (2) lack of facilities, (3) inadequate services in our schools, (4) the physical placement of certain schools and its impact on the community, (5) the blending of diverse cultures, (6) lack of educators, (7) adequate compensation of teachers, and (8) outdated textbooks.

Participants emphasized the import of citizen support of the educational system, and felt citizens needed to feel as though they have stake in the current system in an effort for students and administrators to attain higher achievement goals. Several newspaper articles that were discussed in this group session spoke to pressing issues. One such article revealed a \$12 billion budget cut that

would raise student loan costs, and impact low income students by lessening the availability of student loans; a second article which highlighted two schools as “safe schools” raised the question “why aren’t all schools safe?” The third article about a high school student of Hindu faith dealt with diversity. The student felt ostracized because of her religion. This sparked concerns of lack of sensitivity to diverse cultures and the separation between church and state.

Recommendations

Participants agreed that it is critical for Town of Wake Forest to sponsor multi-cultural events. Suggestions made to help citizens embrace diversity were, a holiday parade in which children from different countries might dress in their native attire; the celebration and acknowledgment of other ethnic customs and religious holidays; a venue wherein students learn and perform music and dance of other cultures; and the concept of a cultural food fair.

In addition, recommendations on schools included hosting parent/school forums, in an informal setting that would encourage citizen participation and ownership, developing education awareness programs that would inform the public about the inner-workings of the school system; sponsors that were considered might involve the Parent Teachers Association, civic clubs, churches, synagogues, and mosques, and the Wake Forest Chamber of Commerce.

Conclusion

The population in the Town of Wake Forest more than tripled in size since 1990, when there were only 5,769 residents. Today there are over 17,000 residents in the town. Wake Forest has one of the highest tax rates in Wake County, second to Garner and tied with Wendell. The average cost of a home in the town is \$143,500.

While population growth and rapid housing development and costs have its advantages with regard to generating added tax revenue, the increase in population size requires local government to continue planning strategically in all areas of service to the community. With these nuances and the amalgam of a more diverse population than ever in the history of the town, come shifts in policy priority, values, culture, education attainment, religion, income and other social and economic factors that will directly impact future autonomy. Local government is aware of these changes and has progressively moved to set priorities in critical areas such as transportation planning, road construction, efforts to diversify local events, development of communications material for visitors and newcomers, and enlisting the input of its citizenry.

Although this report reflects a small percentage of the stakeholders in the community, it serves as an additional assessment tool for which to analyze and weigh political and administrative priorities. The qualitative information should be

used in conjunction with the earlier Action Oriented Community Diagnosis (AOCD) and other studies on the Town of Wake Forest, in an effort to assist administrators in effective planning and overall service delivery to all of its citizens.

As part of the town's community outreach, the Human Relations Council (HRC) is obligated to continue to serve as liaison between citizens and the town to foster communication, understanding, and solidarity among citizens, while working to conduct similar qualitative assessments that will help meet these demands.

References

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